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ABSTRACT

This paper uses five case studies of unskilled writers at the college level to provide insights into the composing process. Each student's writing process was tape-recorded and observed by the instructor in four sessions. The tapes and written observations were charted and analyzed for exhibited behavior patterns in comparison to the written products, inferring from the words on the page how the ideas developed. Results show that the students exhibited consistent behavioral patterns and stylistic or syntactic concerns, that they were more fluent in the reflexive mode, that they used little planning or prewriting, that they had little sense of audience, and that they were unable to explain stylistic changes. The study concludes that the students had not yet internalized all of the rules that would make them skilled writers, nor had they learned how to judge their writing objectively. However, by looking more closely at how such students compose, teachers can increase their understanding of the entire writing process and can improve instructional methods by which students can achieve composition skills. (RS)

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THE COMPOSING PROCESSES OF UNSKILLED WRITERS AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION
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I'm going to talk today about the research I've been doing for a few years on the composing process of unskilled writers at the college level. I thought that what I'd like to present is the design of my study, how I collected my data, the two major ways I chose to analyze the data and some of the results that are beginning to emerge from this analysis.

I became interested in the composing process a few years ago - after reading Janet Emig's research report on the composing process of 12th graders. It seemed to me that she had hit upon on an absolutely crucial idea - that we have focused for so many years on the finished product without ever knowing how that product was created - and I immediately knew that I wanted to discover more about how people - and more particularly my own students - compose.

I knew that if you want to understand how something occurs what you have to do is observe it in as natural a setting as possible. The technique of observing how something emerges and grows, while new to researchers in English is not new to researchers in other fields. Binet based his work on the nature of intelligence by observing the development of his own daughters for many years. Piaget based the entire theory of his early work, The Language and Thought of The Child, on the carefully recorded observation of his two children. More recently, in the field of language acquisition, Roger Brown and Ursula Bellugi (in one study) and Lois Bloom (in another) used small samples studied over

a period of time for the basis of observation and theory formation.

Thus I knew that in order to learn about the process of composing, I would have to spend many hours watching students compose. It also became clear to me that the word "writing" refers to many kinds of activities—that writing in one setting for one particular audience may be different from writing in other settings for other audiences and therefore the behaviors exhibited and the language employed in each context may also differ.

For example, a student writing a journal at home may exhibit a totally different process than that same student writing an exam in class. While both of these are facets of the student's overall composing process, my main concern was with understanding how students - particularly underprepared or unskilled students - handle writing in a college situation.

Thus I decided not to look at all possible writing under all possible settings for all possible readers but rather to control the setting, the audience and the mode of discourse in order to have the writing situation resemble as closely as possible the actual kinds of writing students are required to do in college. Then having limited the broad field of composing to particular kinds of composing, I could begin to look for characteristic patterns that emerge within individual students and among the group of students.

I also knew that in order to get any meaningful results I would have to study the process in-depth. That meant choosing a small sample and doing observation over time rather than a large sample observed only once or a few times. I chose the case-study method as the most appropriate and selected 5 students for the study

all of whom were registered in my basic writing course. I met with each of the five students individually for five one and a half hour sessions. All of the sessions were tape-recorded and took place outside of class time.

Of the five sessions, one was an interview and four were devoted entirely to examining the composing process. The purpose of the interview was to gain an understanding of the student's experience with writing, and the students were interviewed on the following: their memories of writing instruction, when they first learned to write, their experiences with writing in and out of school, whether they ever write on their own, what their attitude toward writing is, how they feel about being graded on their writing, who in their family reads and writes, how they approach a writing task and what their expectations are about writing. They were also asked to bring in samples of writing done outside of class on their own or done in high school and to define a "good writer."

For the four writing sessions, I provided the students with the topics and directions for handling the topic. As I mentioned before, all of the students were placed into my basic writing course, and as a result all of them had identical schedules. As part of our basic writing program, English instructors attend a content course with their students, and most instruction in writing is directly tied to what the students are learning in this course.

From attending this course, I knew what the students were studying, what reading they were doing and what their class discussions were about. When I developed the topics I, therefore, based them on the material from the social science class in which the students were enrolled and these topics were exactly what the social science professor would have asked the students to write about had he given them an assignment. However, I made 2 distinctions. I

divided topics into the extensive and reflexive modes and during one session I would ask the students to write extensively, which required that the writer approach the topic from a cognitive, conceptual point of view (by defining or explaining phenomena). During the next session, I would ask the students to approach the same or similar topic reflexively, in an affective, personalized way (by relating phenomena to their own lives.) My main concern here was to see whether the mode, extensive or reflexive, affected the composing process.

It was clear to the students that they would hand this writing in to me and thus since they had a sense of who they were writing for, I controlled the audience and to a great extent, by specifying the mode of discourse, I was attempting to control the point of view - or the distance between the student and the topic he was discussing.

The setting was always the same - in a soundproof room within the college library and all the sessions were tape-recorded. I asked all of the students to compose aloud, to orally express their thoughts - as they emerged - during the writing process. I explained to them that the purpose of the study was to examine what went on in their heads during the time they were writing and one of the only ways to determine this was for them to express whatever they were thinking about as they progressed.

I should say that their success with composing aloud varied - one student was able to do it perfectly - he would stop, comment in the middle of a sentence about what he was thinking, return to read the directions, return to his writing, compose a few words, change his idea, wonder about spelling or punctuation and then continue writing.

The other students were not as adept and some would whisper, others would read quietly what they had written after it was on the paper and occasionally some wrote silently. Whenever it seemed that composing aloud was interfering with the actual writing or that the student was unable to both write and compose aloud, I did not insist on the oral behavior but rather watched as the student wrote silently.

There was also one other variable included in the design of this study. In 1969, Robert Zoellner took up the entire issue of the January College English with what he called talk → write pedagogy based on operant conditioning techniques of the behavioral sciences. Zoellner's main point was that when teachers tell students to think before they write, they are being vague and simplistic, that we should not focus on thought processes which are mysterious but on verbal utterances which are "concrete, discernible and empirically accessible." In other words, we should direct students to talk and then write rather than to think and then write. He hypothesized that through the act of talking, students would release ideas for the paper. Thus in Sessions 1 and 2, I gave no directions to the students other than specifying the topic, mode of discourse and the overall composing aloud behavior. If they were going to do any form of prewriting, whether it was talking, making an outline, thinking for a few minutes, it would be of their own initiative. In Sessions 4 & 5, however, I directed the students to talk out their ideas before writing, in other words to engage in a kind of prewriting activity in which they would attempt to orally plan their answer before any writing took place.

Thus, among the questions I was interested in were the following:

1. Do individual students exhibit characteristic composing processes? Do these processes vary according to the mode of expression? Do certain stages of the composing process relate specifically to reflexive or extensive writing? Do students exhibit preferences for a particular mode? Are students more fluent in one mode or another?
2. What behaviors are exhibited during the composing process? Are there as many backwards movements as there are forward movements? Are there more? less? Do the unskilled writers in this study spend time prewriting if not directed? At what point does hesitation or silence appear in the process? What is the pace of writing in individual students? Does directed oral planning affect the composing process in any way? Are there any observable differences in the composing process as a result of talking? How do revision and reformulation proceed? What behaviors are discernible in moving from first to subsequent drafts? At what point do aesthetic or stylistic changes or transforming/embedding changes occur, if at all? At what point and in what ways is composing concluded?

I am sure you'll agree that all of these questions are interesting - and that the design I've described so far seems reasonable and controlled. Well, what do you do, how do you translate hours of observation and tape into a coherent system that attempts to answer the questions I've posed? It seemed to me that there were two ways to proceed:

1.) by looking at the actual behaviors exhibited by students during writing - in other words, examining the process directly - and 2.) by analyzing the written products - in other words, inferring from the words on the page how the ideas developed.

I did this dual analysis on all of the four writing sessions for each of the five students. At each point I became increasingly aware that process and product exist in an interactive way and that in order to construct an accurate picture of the composing process, one needs to take both into account.

It is by now established that writing is not always a straightforward, linear process in which one word and one thought carefully and chronologically follow another - but rather - a process that is recursive, that circles back on itself and that often moves forward only after it has moved back. It seemed to me if I was really going to describe the process rather than talk around it, I would have to find some way to indicate these movements. A narrative that described, first the student did this, then he did this, clearly seemed inadequate and the amount of time taken to describe what he did would be greater than the amount of time invested in writing. Secondly, within a narrative there would be no way to view how each discrete behavior affected the process as a whole.

What I did was to develop a chart which indicates, on one page, the behaviors, the sequence, and the movements that occurred during a particular composing session. The charts are structural - in other words they do not explain what a student wrote but rather how he wrote it - and to me that is exactly what the composing process is - a picture of how someone wrote, what movements occurred - from the beginning to the end of the process.

I have provided you with charts of four sessions which make it possible to see what the writer was doing at all points of the writing process. I think you can begin to see that if you have four of these on one student, you can immediately determine whether there are any consistent patterns or whether during each session the behaviors vary. You can see how much time is invested in prewriting, how long it takes to write each sentence, what behaviors occurred within the writing of each sentence and what behaviors are exhibited between sentences. ~~(Explain on board).~~

I found that these structural charts were important in a number of ways:

1. they provide an overview of the entire session <u>on one page</u>
2. they indicate the important behavioral movements without being anecdotal (they are not content oriented but structural)
3. from them, patterns within a student's composing process can be determined.
4. from these patterns, similarities and differences among a group of students can be determined.

Thus the first way I analyzed my data was to construct these charts. From them I could begin to see whether students wrote differently in the reflexive and extensive modes, how much time was invested in prewriting and in writing, at what points and where editing took place, when students remained at the word level and when they wrote consistently at the sentence level.

However, as important as I felt all of this was - I also felt it only produced one side of the picture - that as important as the behavioral acts are - the actual development of ideas on the page - the way the content develops is equally important.

Thus having completed the structural charts, I began to look at

the strategies used by students to handle the topics given to them, the level of language they employed, and the distance between themselves and the topic. I was not so much concerned with correctness as I was with the way one thought led to another on the page. As James Britton has said, one can infer something about the process from the product itself and thus it seemed to me that from the sequence of sentences one could draw inferences about how the student's thinking was also proceeding.

In this analysis I was most concerned with the ways students chose to answer the questions, how concrete or abstract they were, whether their definitions were consistent, whether their papers were logical or exhibited flaws in logic, what kinds of generalizations they applied to phenomena, how personal their language was and to what degree they exhibited flexibility and tentativeness.

As I said before, it seemed to me that both analyses are important - that the behaviors exhibited tell us <u>how</u> students proceed and provide us with information we have never established before (we have never really known what the <u>pace</u> is for a particular writer - or how many backwards movements are necessary before a move forward takes place) but that without looking at the product, we are only providing half of the picture - that writing is a deliberate and thoughtful act and that when one constructs a picture of a student as a writer, he or she must also consider that student as a thinker.

In the few minutes remaining to me, I would like to provide you with some of the more revealing results and some of the insights that have come to me during this study.

I have decided to divide the results into two categories: what these students do and what they don't do.

First of all, I will argue with anyone who says that unskilled writers are beginning writers. They may not be competent according to criteria we establish, but they are by no means beginners. They exhibit consistent behavioral patterns through all of the writing sessions. They have rituals that get them started, particular strategies to keep them going. It can be said that some of their approaches are only half-formed, but however incomplete, these students are not starting from the beginning.

Secondly, all of the students in the study exhibit stylistic and syntactic concerns. Editing occurs throughout the process - often it occurs to such an extent that it inhibits the process - and concerns range from grammar and punctuation to word choice and development of ideas.

Thirdly, the majority of the students are more fluent in the reflexive mode. They produce more words, with greater ease and generally in less time in the reflexive mode. Often their own experience serves as the starting point for generalizations. When the process is reversed and they are required to discuss concepts outside of their own experience, writing is much slower and many more logical inconsistencies appear.

Looking at what unskilled writers don't do is often more revealing about their composing process than what they do.

First of all, very little planning or prewriting occurs. Often the first draft serves as a rough outline from which other drafts are developed but any sense of having a conscious plan or any articulated prewriting strategy is lacking. Even when students talk out their ideas before writing, the movement from talking to writing is abrupt and there seems to be little sense of any link between talking and writing. To most of the students, talking comes easily; writing involves choices on syntactic, semantic and lexical levels and talking offers very little means of solving problems when these choices must be made on paper.

Secondly, there is very little sense of audience. Each of the students makes assumptions that the reader shares or understands the context being written about and a restricted code is often employed. Thus the students will often write, "they treat us poorly" without explicitly indicating who the pronouns refer to, suggesting a narrow frame of reference.

Thirdly, when questioned about their writing or about why they changed one word to another, the students were able to discuss the content of what they wrote but not to explain their stylistic changes. Thus they could discuss their ideas but they could not see the writing as a whole, as a discourse which could be discussed in and of itself.

Where the study has brought me so far is to say that writing is a developmental process - that there is a continuum upon which writing and the ability to grow as a writer is based. However we are just

beginning to see what elements comprise the composing process and how these elements differ for different writers at different times. We are also beginning to see at least some of the broad outlines that separate one stage along the writing continuum from another.

What I have seen thus far is that there is parallel movement from the word to the sentence level, from one's own experience to the world at large and from a restricted audience to a broad, general one. Students who have reached college without the basic skills that once were a guarantee for success in college exist at different points along this continuum. They exhibit definite patterns and have certain strategies and approaches, but they have not yet internalized all of the rules that would make them skilled writers nor have they learned how to judge their writing objectively - to set up an aesthetic distance between themselves and their written products. However by looking longer and closer at how these students compose, we are increasing our understanding of the entire writing process, we are getting a more detailed picture of what the writing continuum looks like and we are beginning to see where these students fit along this continuum.

In the past we've often based our teaching of good writing on the looks of a good finished product. It seems to me with research on the composing process, we're attempting to make the fit between product and process tighter. With more serious and sustained efforts in this area, we will be able to articulate a teaching pedagogy based not on the behavioral sciences or an after-the fact analysis of products but on the demonstrated, observable way students actually grow as writers.